

# **Lyndon B. Johnson: Domestic Affairs**

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The Lyndon Johnson presidency marked a vast expansion in the role of the national government in domestic affairs. Johnson laid out his vision of that role in a commencement speech at the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964. He called on the nation to move not only toward "the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society," which he defined as one that would "end poverty and racial injustice." To that end, the national government would have to set policies, establish "floors" of minimum commitments for state governments to meet, and provide additional funding to meet these goals. By winning the election of 1964 in a historic landslide victory, LBJ proved to America that he had not merely inherited the White House but that he had earned it. The election's mandate provided the justification for Johnson's extensive plans to remake America. Large Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, along with Johnson's ability to deal with powerful, conservative southern committee leaders, created a promising legislative environment for the new chief executive.

## **The Great Society**

Johnson labeled his ambitious domestic agenda "The Great Society." The most dramatic parts of his program concerned bringing aid to underprivileged Americans, regulating natural resources, and protecting American consumers. There were environmental protection laws, landmark land conservation measures, the profoundly influential Immigration Act, bills establishing a National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, a Highway Safety Act, the Public Broadcasting Act, and a bill to provide consumers with some protection against shoddy goods and dangerous products.

To address issues of inequality in education, vast amounts of money were poured into colleges to fund certain students and projects and into federal aid for elementary and secondary education, especially to provide remedial services for poorer districts, a program that no President had been able to pass because of the disputes over aid to parochial schools. Johnson, a Protestant, managed to forge a compromise that did provide some federal funds to Catholic parochial schools. He signed the bill at the one-room schoolhouse that he had attended as a child near Stonewall, Texas. With him was Mrs. Kate Deadrich Loney, the teacher of the school in whose lap Johnson sat as a four-year-old.

To deal with escalating problems in urban areas, Johnson won passage of a bill establishing a Department of Housing and Urban Development and appointed Robert Weaver, the first

African American in the cabinet, to head it. The department would coordinate vastly expanded slum clearance, public housing programs, and economic redevelopment within inner cities. LBJ also pushed through a "highway beautification" act in which Lady Bird had taken an interest. For the elderly, Johnson won passage of Medicare, a program providing federal funding of many health care expenses for senior citizens. The "medically indigent" of any age who could not afford access to health care would be covered under a related "Medicaid" program funded in part by the national government and run by states under their welfare programs.

### **The War on Poverty**

LBJ's call on the nation to wage a war on poverty arose from the ongoing concern that America had not done enough to provide socioeconomic opportunities for the underclass. Statistics revealed that although the proportion of the population below the "poverty line" had dropped from 33 to 23 percent between 1947 and 1956, this rate of decline had not continued; between 1956 and 1962, it had dropped only another 2 percent. Additionally, during the Kennedy years, the actual number of families in poverty had risen. Most ominous of all, the number of children on welfare, which had increased from 1.6 million in 1950 to 2.4 million in 1960, was still going up. Part of the problem involved racial disparities: the unemployment rate among black youth approached 25 percent—less at that time than the rate for white youths—though it had been only 8 percent twenty years before.

To remedy this situation, President Kennedy commissioned a domestic program to alleviate the struggles of the poor. Assuming the presidency when Kennedy was assassinated, Johnson decided to continue the effort after he returned from the tragedy in Dallas. One of the most controversial parts of Johnson's domestic program involved this War on Poverty.

Within six months, the Johnson task forces had come up with plans for a "community action program" that would establish an agency—known as a "community action agency" or CAA—in each city and county to coordinate all federal and state programs designed to help the poor. Each CAA was required to have "maximum feasible participation" from residents of the communities being served. The CAAs in turn would supervise agencies providing social services, mental health services, health services, employment services, and so on. In 1964, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act, establishing the Office of Economic Opportunity to run this program. Republicans voted in opposition, claiming that the measure would create an administrative nightmare, and that Democrats had not been willing to compromise with them. Thus the War on Poverty began on a sour, partisan note.

Soon, some of the local CAAs established under the law became embroiled in controversy. Local community activists wanted to control the agencies and fought against established city and county politicians intent on dominating the boards. Since both groups were important constituencies in the Democratic Party, the "war" over the War on Poverty threatened party stability. President Johnson ordered Vice President Hubert Humphrey to mediate between community groups and "city halls," but the damage was already done. Democrats were sharply divided, with liberals calling for a greater financial commitment—Johnson was spending about \$1 billion annually—and conservatives calling for more control by established politicians. Meanwhile, Republicans were charging that local CAAs were run by "poverty hustlers" more intent on lining their own pockets than on alleviating the conditions of the poor.

By 1967, Congress had given local governments the option to take over the CAAs, which significantly discouraged tendencies toward radicalism within the Community Action Program. By the end of the Johnson presidency, more than 1,000 CAAs were in operation, and the number remained relatively constant into the twenty-first century, although their funding and administrative structures were dramatically altered—they largely became limited vehicles for social service delivery. Nevertheless, other War on Poverty initiatives have fared better. These include the Head Start program of early education for poor children; the Legal Services Corporation, providing legal aid to poor families; and various health care programs run out of neighborhood clinics and hospitals.

Overall government funding devoted to the poor increased greatly. Between 1965 and 1968, expenditures targeted at the poor doubled, from \$6 billion to \$12 billion, and then doubled again to \$24.5 billion by 1974. The billions of dollars spent to aid the poor did have effective results, especially in job training and job placement programs. Partly as a result of these initiatives—and also due to a booming economy—the rate of poverty in America declined significantly during the Johnson years. Millions of Americans raised themselves above the "poverty line," and the percentage under it declined from 20 to 12 percent between 1964 and 1974. Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding the War on Poverty hurt the Democrats, contributing to their defeat in 1968 and engendering deep antagonism from racial, fiscal, and cultural conservatives.

Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. "Franklin D. Roosevelt: Domestic Affairs." Accessed April 10, 2016. <http://millercenter.org/president/biography/fdroosevelt-domestic-affairs>.

## Weapons Against Poverty

[http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/lbjforkids/pov\\_weapons.shtm](http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/lbjforkids/pov_weapons.shtm)

Walter W. Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, under President Kennedy, went to see President Johnson the day after Kennedy's assassination and discussed the poverty program that Kennedy had approved before his death. President Johnson's immediate response was, "That's my kind of program! I want you to move full speed ahead."

Soon after Walter Heller's proposal, President Johnson launched an "unconditional war on poverty" during his 1964 State of The Union Address. On August 20, 1964 LBJ signed the Poverty Bill which created a new department (Office of Economic Opportunity) to begin the direct attack on the causes of poverty in the rural Appalachian region of America. Sargent Shriver was sworn in on October 16, 1964 to be the leader of this attack and the Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity. The poverty program was the first major legislation originated by President Johnson and it was designed to make a coordinated attack on the multiple causes of poverty. The major attack on poverty, which consisted of one fifth of the nation's population at the time, can be broken down into three major weapons:

**Weapon I - Education** - *"It is our primary weapon in the war on poverty and the principal tool for building a Great Society."*

President Johnson believed that the improvement of education would help eliminate the causes of poverty. The following programs were designed to do just that and are still with us today.

**Project Head Start (1965)** - was designed as a compensatory program for economically deprived preschool children. Its purpose was to give them the educational, social, cultural, and medical attention provided to more fortunate children by their families.

**Upward Bound (1965)** - is an educational program whose purpose is to implant in low-income high school students a desire to go to college. It is aimed at young people who show college aptitude but who would not go to college without special encouragement.

**Adult Basic Education (1965)** - was designed to give illiterate or uneducated adults sufficient instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic to qualify them for jobs or better jobs than they currently hold. It also included job training.

**The Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965** - The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was the nation's first national education law. It provided federal funding for state-run programs, for eligible schools and districts eager to raise the academic achievement of struggling learners and address the complex challenges that arise for students who live with disability, mobility problems, learning difficulties, poverty, or transience, or who need to learn English.

**The Higher Education Act of 1965** - The Higher Education Act (PL 89-329) was signed at Southwest Texas State College in San Marcos, Texas. It was the first U.S. Congressional approval for scholarships to undergraduate students. The Act included insurance on student loans, transferred the work-study program to the Office of Higher Education, and created the National Teacher Corps which was designed to improve elementary and secondary education in needy urban and rural areas. Teams consisting of an experienced teacher and several young college graduates were sent in to strengthen local school programs.

**Weapon II - Income Maintenance** - *"The second prong on the attack on poverty is to protect individuals and their families from poverty when their own earnings are insufficient because of age, disability, unemployment, or other family circumstances."*

**Social Security Amendments of 1965 and 1967** - Congress in 1965 and 1967 enacted bills raising Social Security benefits and making major changes in the Social Security System. The 1965 bill only liberalized and expanded programs; the 1967 measure also wrote new restrictions into the welfare program.

**Revenue Act of 1964** - The existing 18% withholding rate on income taxes was reduced to 14 % on enactment of the bill.

**Minimum Wage Bill of 1966** - Congress enacted legislation substantially broadening federal minimum wage and overtime pay protection and increasing the minimum wage from \$1.25 per hour to \$1.60 per hour.

**School Breakfast Program** - This program started under the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. Federal money is provided for each breakfast served, depending on the family income of the participating child.

**Special Milk Program** - This program also began under the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. Federal reimbursements are offered for each half-pint of milk served to a child who is participating in a school or facility caring for children that does not participate in other federally subsidized meal programs.

**Food Stamp Act of 1964** - Congress in 1964 enacted legislation converting the 1961 pilot food-stamp program into a permanent food-stamp program financed by the Federal Government. This program was designed to help poverty stricken families improve their diets.

**Weapon III - Job Creation** - *"Our American answer to poverty is not to make the poor more secure in their poverty but to reach down and to help them lift themselves out of the ruts of poverty and move with the large majority along the high road of hope and prosperity"*

**Job Corps (1964)** - provides residential centers for young men and women, ages 16 through 21, in a coordinated program of basic education, skill training, and constructive work experience. This was designed specifically to give education and work experience to high school drop-outs.

**College Work Study Program (1964)** - provides part-time and summer jobs for college students who would be unable to afford college education without such assistance.

**The Neighborhood Youth Corps (1964)** - provides employment, job counseling, and remedial education to low-income young people aged 16 through 21. This program aims to help participants to continue or resume their education and to increase their employability.

**The Work Experience Program (1964)** - is meant to benefit unemployed parents and other needy people--many on welfare--who suffer from educational deficiencies and a sporadic work history. Participants are provided vocational instruction and on-the-job training, as well as basic educational and personal counseling.

**Manpower Act of 1965** - provided retraining for experienced workers with family responsibilities who had been employed but had lost their jobs because of technological change. It also provided help for the illiterate jobless, out-of-school and out-of-work youths 16 years and older. Individuals who lacked basic education were included.